LITTLE INDIA

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Vidiadhar Naipaul has never visited Fiji. He has been to other places with substantial Indian communities – East Africa, Mauritius, the West Indies – but not Fiji. Some years ago I invited him, but the context of the invitation was probably wrong. I had just edited a centenary tribute to the Fiji Indians and sent him a copy. He was happy with it, and said 'the topic is close to my heart, as it has to be'; the rest was generous praise. On the question of a visit to Fiji he said nothing. Even so, I had expected him to write something more, not so much on the book itself but on the subject matter, the subject of displaced Indians, the agony of Rama's banishment and his own attitudes to it. About these he remained silent.

Years later when I looked at his brief note, I began to understand why Fiji did not interest him. Fiji was too much like India. Moreover, the diasporic Indians in Fiji lacked pathos and conflict; the world they inhabited was far too stable and their interactions with the Fijian race virtually nonexistent. Secure in their cultural certainties (the Indians much less so, but grand illusions had always sustained them), the two races did not produce the vibrant language one finds in the West Indies or Mauritius. Even the much-maligned Fiji Hindi was pretty close to received standard Hindi, and English remained very much a second language. As a second language it was spoken slowly, precisely, in drill-like fashion, by Fijians and Indians alike. Like some magical mantra it was treated with tremendous respect or deference. It was not the language of their consciousness, and so could not generate the cacophony of voices that a writer would find exciting. So V. S. Naipaul did not come to Fiji, not even after the coup of 14 May 1987, because there was no narrative to write, no story to tell. Yet as the founder of a specifically displaced Indian discourse, V. S. Naipaul has always been close to the hearts and minds of the Fiji Indian. When the University of the South Pacific opened its doors in 1968, V. S. Naipaul became an indispensable text for the Fiji Indian students.

Five years before that, in 1963, Oliver Vinod, my classmate at the Suva Grammar School's 'multiracial sixth form', had asked Mrs Bamford, our English teacher, for permission to discuss *A House for Mr Biswas* in class. Oliver Vinod had read the book from the open shelves of the British Council Library. I suspect he was the first reader of that

book in Fiji. He was moved by it, and so was I, though I was familiar only with the passages I managed to read during lunch recess. To her credit, Mrs Bamford took the book home and, she said, read it until the early hours of the morning. The following day she explained how difficult it was for her to read the book. 'I couldn't get into it, it seemed to wobble so much, lacked a sense of unity, of design, and the language was, in part, so odd. I'm sorry,' she said, 'we can't possibly read it in class.' Oliver was downcast, and he protested – as a Christian he felt he had rights to object that the others, poor Hindus like me, never had – but to no avail. In the next lesson we returned to *Henry IV Part I* and valiantly read out our allotted parts.

To discuss literature in the colony was to understand a particular English sensibility. To create was to create with an artificially constructed English mind where we saw ourselves, our real world, in terms of the unreal categories of thought that came with our training. Our diet, our clothes, our feelings, were all transformed beyond recognition in our creative discourses. Non-English sensibilities – our own, for instance, or that of V. S. Naipaul – were somehow alien or aberrant, irrelevant to true aesthetic experience. There was thus a double rejection going on: a rejection of one's cultural past (whatever Indianness there was), and a rejection of one's freedom to order reality, to write about it in ways that we, and not Mrs Bamford, could understand. We were very confused, for we were doubly alien – alien to the English language, alien also to the land where we were born – and our alienness found no sympathizers. Thirty years later the nature of that alienness has not changed.

Somewhere Naipaul once wrote that we came from an India relatively untouched by the great reform movements of the nineteenth century. He was referring specifically to his grandfather's generation, but he could have been writing about the Fiji Indians as well. The 60,000-odd Indians who came to Fiji between 1879 and 1917 represented a good cross-section of the various linguistic and religious groups of India. A close reading of the immigration passes (such as that done by Brij Lal) indicates that there is quite a remarkable congruity between the caste, religious and linguistic distribution of those 60,000 migrants and their counterparts in India. 'Little India', as J. W. Coulter called Fiji in 1941, was in essence a microcosmic fragment of greater India.

As a fragment this 'Little India', insecure, confused and hysterical from the start, conformed to the classic definitions of other fragment societies studied by historians such as Louis Hartz. The Fiji Indian fragment also underwent two stages of change. Its initial stage – a constant process of assimilating later migrants – was marked by a highly imaginative and egalitarian sense of social cohesion and purpose. During this stage the fragment reconstituted in a much more

dynamic sense the oppositional structures that made up the Indian centre. The first forty years, when there was a continuous arrival of migrants, was probably the most exciting period. But the excitement of reconstitution was followed by a stage in which a nostalgic past was imposed upon the realities of the present. Through a peculiar process of 'perverse' maturity, this second stage is the stage of ossification. The revolutionary capacities of the fragment at its moment of encounter with the new land (since the control mechanisms of the mother country are absent) are quickly overtaken by the triumph of the 'fossil'. At the same time the structural inadequacy of the fragment produces a psychology that leads to the construction of ghostly enemies – the colonial masters, the indigenous race – and generates a sense of threat, which in turn reinforces the need for the fragment to be unified. The fragment called itself *girmitiyas*, a Hindi neologism coined from the term for the 'agreement' that the indentured labourers had to sign.

Gradually this fragment began to show an almost total lack of self-reflexivity or relationality. Excitable and prone to political hysteria, it was so self-enclosed that it could not go beyond the triple Indian objective of *roti*, *kaparha* and *makaan* (bread, clothes and house). In some ways the fragment, with peasant innocence, saw political ascendancy in these terms as well: more bread, better clothes and better homes (or land). But Fiji was not a *tabula rasa*, an empty space upon which one's future hopes could be freely etched. Nor did the Fiji Indians have the authority and power of conquerors like the settlers in the white dominions. There was in Fiji a highly developed Fijian society, itself extremely suspicious of intruders and wary of the newcomers' sense of the self-validating significance of political power. Like Othello's relationship with Desdemona, there was something inherently tragic about the relationship between the Fijian body politic and the Indian splinter in its side. If ever suspicions were aroused (and there were many colonial Iagos) the consequences would be tragic.

It may be argued that in the course of time this 'Little India' developed a specific way of looking at the world that could be explained in terms of the concept of ideology as a necessary but essentially false consciousness. Because of its necessity, the Fiji Indian transformed this falsification that I have called the 'girmit ideology' into a highly developed social construct. The girmit ideology informed Indian social processes and formations to such an extent that it alone legitimated their existence. In this way the diasporic Indian excluded from his interactive domains other Indians (notably merchant traders and other free Indian migrants) who could not possibly share the girmit ethos. Furthermore, the girmit ideology blinded the Fiji Indians to the facts of life in Fiji, particularly the relationship that they ought to enter into with the native Fijians. Above all, it gave the Indians in Fiji a false sense of security, a false reading of politics and an insularity that could then be exploited by others (by the colonizers as well as by expatriate

Indian politicians). Quite possibly, the girmit ideology gave them an inferiority complex, because it was not possible to enact that consciousness; but action didn't really matter because there had already been a positive fulfilment in the millenarianism that reinforced, for the Fiji Indian, the presence of a *Ram rajya*, the Kingdom of Rama, in the distant past.

We are clearly on speculative ground here, but I believe it is fruitful speculative ground. If we recall that the second stage of the fragment is marked by a tendency towards fossilization, it becomes easier to accept a reading of history in terms of an unfulfilled past retrospectively endowed with a fullness, a completion, that it never had. This is really the essence of the *Ram rajya* structure – the belief that in the Kingdom of Rama left behind the millennium had found a complete, unproblematic expression of its goals. History is transformed into a failed millenarian quest, since the real historical moment is continually displaced by the myth of a fulfilment in the future that, given its regression to *Ram rajya*, is a duplication of the past. The fossilized fragment seeks renewal through a continued re-fossilization of itself. The structure is used with a similar nostalgic referent by the Fiji Indian poet Satendra Nandan, who writes:

> youth i lost here, and grace
> i gave to this island place.
> what more than a man's age
> can one give to history's outrage?
> . . .
> i have lived this exile
> more gloriously than rama
> and built kingdoms, you may find,
> nobler than ajodhya
> in my ancient, eternal mind!
> (*Voices in the River*, 52)

There is something pathetic about the claims of those who participated in the original journey. The comparison with Rama ('more gloriously') is a necessary overstatement, given the need to affirm one's exile, but the achievement, the building of kingdoms, is a curious double take. The new kingdoms are certainly nobler, but they are also regressive and fictive – 'in my ancient, eternal mind!' But oral history is also inauthentic against the institutionalized truth value of the colonizer's history. The claims of a superior experience, a keener sense of perception, are, after all, claims of the word curiously out of place in the world of documented history. Thus, in 'The Old Man and the Scholar', Nandan writes:

> authentic history cannot be written
> with words from living mouths. (61)

If the Fiji Indians' own history was inauthentic, that of the indigenous

Fijian culture was equally alien and unreal. A self-sufficient Indian diaspora had no access to the forms of consciousness that governed the Fijian race. The Fijian was constructed by the imperial machinery as well. Though the machinery was benevolent, it was fundamentally reactionary, defining Fijian culture and institutions in ways that suited its own needs. In other words, for the fossilized Indian, the Fijian was not so much the 'being' that he was for his own people as a discursive construction of the colonizer. For the Fijian, similarly, the fossil was constructed in the same fashion. Mediatized social interaction denied both races authentic experience of the other. The unity of the fragment thus arose in response to what were essentially 'myths' of the Fijian, however these had been defined. One of the tragedies was that this self-enclosed fragment mistook these phantoms for reality, in much the same way as former Indian Nationalist leaders constructed ghostly enemies (the colonial masters, the indigenous race) in Fiji on the basis of their experience in India. These fears generated a sense of threat that in turn strengthened the unity of the fragment. The girmit ideology, like all imaginary belief systems, was left without history and without a capacity for action when the Fijian rebellion of 1987 decisively changed the future of Fiji.

The incredible success of the rebellion (better known around the world as the 'Pacific Coup') left the girmit ideology bereft of any direction. Unknown to the Indians, the Fijian hegemony that imperialism had constructed acted in accordance with a historical predictability that Whitehall clearly understood, but refused to recognize. The structures that had been put in place – the creation of imaginary constituencies and paramount chiefdoms, the racial homogeneity of the Fiji Military Forces, the exclusion of the migrant race from all forms of 'Fijian' representations – reacted with a vengeance that shook the girmit ideology to its very foundation and demonstrated the ideology's inability to come to terms with historical realities. An ideology based upon fictions – its own and those of the imperial order – responded by turning inwards, but found no sustaining oppositions like those of the centre it had left behind a century earlier. The contradictions that lead to dynamic response to any threat were no longer there. The Fijian rebellion demonstrated how far the Indian diaspora, as a fragment, had reconstituted an India that could not interact with the Fijian world. At the same time this Fijian world, still trapped in an imperialist conception of itself, had not acknowledged the historical reality of the people of the diaspora. The schism that 14 May brought about grew out of a drama authored by colonialism. It was a drama of multiple false consciousnesses – both Fijian and Indian – trying to find an authentic ground for their existence. The narrative of Fijian history since 1879 was plotted by the colonizer the moment the Indian arrived. But postcolonial Fiji would replay its colonial past with far less panache.

In one way, a radical rewriting of that history – a shift in consciousness along the lines of a class-based social order that would make the concept of race itself irrelevant – was implicit in the political manifesto of the Fiji Labour Party. When the Fijian revolt pre-empted that radical rewriting (and the end of 'ideology') the Indian fragment returned to its fossils, and the Fijians, under different circumstances, did the same. The revolt re-established chiefly power, which, like any immemorial tradition, had no need for historical justification. The rebellion thus re-fossilized the Indian fragment as well as the Fijian, the latter adopting and embracing in the process the structures of a colonialism that was responsible for the racial impasse in the first place. In a curious way, the revolt was a highly imperialist gesture, one that had been an inherent part of colonial policy throughout the twentieth century. What the moment of 14 May 1987 finally established is the pre-eminence of power over politics, racial difference over coexistence, custom and tradition over history. If the fragment can no longer function with its head held high, its options for self-expression become progressively limited.

One aspect of the fragment's culture that now clearly requires re-theorizing is its literature. At one level the literature of this fossil written in English is marked by a deep-seated schizophrenia or contradiction that one finds in other postcolonial literatures. In purely formalist terms, the contradiction arises from the way in which the colonized is compromised by the generic expectations, discourses, intertextual and aesthetic frames of the colonizer. The absent colonizer continues to manipulate the discourse of the colonized, imposes ghostly standards, the perfection of standard English, which prohibit the emergence of a language that can speak with the authentic voices of the colonized. In a way, the writers of this Indian fragment (Subramani and Raymond Pillai among them) are bonded to a kind of literary imprisonment that leads to a general mimicry of the colonizer's discourses. This mimicry demonstrates the degree to which the indentured Indian has become fossilized twice over – once as a frozen fragment of Mother India, and again as a 'linguistic' fragment of the language left behind by the colonizer. Beneath this is the power of the colonizer's immense control over those apparatuses which control culture. Thus the colonizer's estranged standard English, his selective Protestant ethic and his dissemination of selected literary texts for colonial consumption (*Henry V*, Sheridan, Thomas Hardy, *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*) meant that the colonized were never exposed to the great and complex texts of the metropolitan centre. Nor were they exposed to experimental, high modern texts that arose from a desire to foreground the uncanonized. Indentured Indian writing, like Aboriginal writing, was trapped in this generic and linguistic vacuum, since the Indians were taught no other. Their own fantastic texts (including

the greatest text of all, the *Mahabharata*) were suppressed as texts without power and bereft of knowledge.

Within the limited scope of this short essay it is possible only to explore the representation of the Fiji Indian (self-representation as well as representations of the other) through the work of two poets, Satendra Nandan and Sudesh Mishra.

The imaginative world of Satendra Nandan grows out of the special predicament of the Indian fragment in Fiji. It is built around an intuitive grasp of the girmit ideology, which Nandan occasionally blasts open, often parodies, but invariably enters into through a process of self-dialogization. The dialogue is with the master-narrative of V. S. Naipaul, who gave the Indian diaspora, of Fiji and elsewhere, a distinctive discourse and a specific literary consciousness. In a significant way, then, Naipaul is the literary precursor of Nandan, a structure of possibility, defining limits and suggesting alternatives. Naipaul's is a founding discourse, which will now be continually rewritten and embellished. But Naipaul remained monolingual, and had to transform Hindi discourses into English. Nandan introduces the discourse of the other, the colonized, into his texts, thereby simultaneously appropriating and abrogating the language of the colonizer, and problematizing bilingual writing itself.

One of the dominant features of Satendra Nandan's writing is the presence, in explicit or transformed shape, of the narrative of Rama's banishment, the exile of the epic hero for fourteen years, which became one of the archetypal myths of Indian culture. Nandan accepts this myth as an underlying structural imperative of Fiji Indian culture and society. Its force does not lie in any vulgar homologization, as if Fiji Indians consciously played out that structure. Rather it is a function of the complex transformation of the fossil society itself as it attempts to construct a narrative to explain its own existence in terms of the only available and shared discourse in which a similar act of displacement or banishment has been documented. Nandan's work expresses the agony of banishment in other forms, but his narratives are written essentially against the backdrop of this 'primal' banishment. Thus the complete inclusiveness of the village world, its closed world order and, most importantly, its myths and idioms, are informed at every point by a complex transformational process that left the Fiji Indian with an ideology that was dated and without any revolutionary impetus – a fragment retreated into its memories of a prior narrative that is itself an uncritical glorification of a mythic past with its sexism, racism and caste divisions intact.

Nandan is the centre of his own narratives, narratives with a unity that arises from the experiences of the past, many of which occurred in and around the village of his birth. His collections of verse are therefore journeys into a past left behind. What strikes me more emphatically on

rereading his poems is the polyphonic nature of his verse. This polyphony takes the form of a realist mode that is carved open or radically splintered by a specifically *girmitiya* discourse that linguists generally refer to as Fiji Hindi. The discourse of Fiji Hindi is one way in which the language of the colonizer may be both ironized and deconstructed. Let me examine this further with reference to his poem 'The Strange Death of Bisnath' (63–5). The poem has a simple, straightforward narrative structure. An airport has been built around Bisnath's hut, and his hens as well as his cows have lost their freedom to graze. He complains to the colonial governor, but is rebuked for his audacity by the local district officer, a fellow Indian, who tells him that matters of this kind (complaints based on a total ignorance of the colonial pecking order) could be amicably handled between Indians. The gesture understood, 'bisnath, ramnath's brightest son' offers him *nagona* (grog) that night, and dies in the early hours of the morning as a result of a coronary thrombosis.

The simplicity of the structure belies the ideological statement that arises out of Nandan's destabilization of the natural continuum of the colonizer's language. In one way the colonizer assumes unproblematic representationalism through the English language; once the colonized have mastered its grammar, they too can mimic poetic forms for purposes of artistic representation. To an extent, Nandan is trapped in this borrowed linguistic garb. But the defining moments in the poem arise not when the signifiers can be grounded to their signifieds but when an alien discourse distorts and disorientates the language of standard English. It is at moments like this – appropriation marked by linguistic rebelliousness – that another voice emerges, a polyphony, that requires of the reader an act of labour. In classic accounts of the reading process (Empson, Riffaterre, Lotman) it is ambiguity or resistance to representation in the dominant language itself that leads to poetic 'significance' and the construction of meaning. Here the resistances come from the manipulation of another language, which requires both a gloss and a radical shift in perspective. The critique comes from precisely the discourse of the 'Other' that colonial curriculum had suppressed. And in the self-conscious appropriation of the discourse of the 'Other' that was most suppressed (Fiji Hindi as opposed to High Standard Hindi, *Khari Boli*) we find a challenge to the nature of poetry itself. Let us look at just one particular phrase: *ghar jao nagona pio* ('go home and drink *yagona*/grog'), varied to *sahib, ao nagona pio* ('Sir, come in and drink yagona'). There can be nothing more ordinary than these utterances in Fiji Hindi. And nothing can be more removed from poetic discourse either, especially as the colonial overseers in the sugar plantations had included these in the list of phrases they memorized. Thus the Indian district officer's use of this discourse (through the echo of its use by the ruling class) makes him an accomplice and gives him power over his own kinsmen. Similarly,

Bisnath's manipulation of the phrase (who understood the district officer's 'cunning, coolie smile') through its repetition demonstrates the ways in which the colonized too had learnt to play the game.

The contradictory discourses that go into the making of 'The Strange Death of Bisnath' may be found elsewhere in Nandan's verse, though unfortunately not in the gratuitous translations into *Khari Boli* of selected pieces at the end of the volume. There is, however, another kind of polyphony arising out of non-realistic representations that is directly related to my discussion so far. This kind of polyphony is best exemplified in the poems of a young Fiji Indian poet, Sudesh Mishra. Mishra's polyphony reworks the Indo-Fijian literary tradition exemplified in Nandan's realist texts into discourses that mingle into one another and have a markedly 'postmodern' resonance. The kind of postmodernity I have in mind is the type that groups a certain 'uncanonized' body of literature as the underside of a literary-cultural dominant. In this postmodernity, for which the postcolonial is remarkably well equipped, discourses of the 'Other' threaten to blast open representation without marking their difference out as Nandan's discourse, more cautiously, does. Thus Nandan's postmodern polyphony is anticipated, marked, and glossed in the texts themselves. Mishra's, on the other hand, invades the colonizer's language, and substitutes in strategic places the language of the colonized for that of the colonizer. Here are two lines from the opening poem of his collection *Rahu*, 'Confessions of a Poetaster from Fiji':

> forking visions of men in mire,
> maya in men. Deep in my *teeriteeri*
> (Mishra, 1987, 1)

The hidden intertext here is obviously Yeats' 'Byzantium' ('And all complexities of mire or blood'), but notice how 'men in mire' (Mishra's version) is invaded by its chiasmic 'maya in men'. 'Mire' (literally 'swampy ground') is glossed by 'maya' (the principle of illusion), which is closer to what Yeats had in mind. But notice too how the base meaning of 'mire' is now repeated in the hidden *sandhya bhasha* (twilight language), the cryptic language of the colonized, as it appears in *teeriteeri*. This Fijian word (not a Fiji Hindi word), which is glossed as 'mangrove swamp', has become part of Fiji Hindi and is therefore doubly contextualized. But it does a fillip on 'mire', since that word finds its 'representational' synonym in *teeriteeri* but its poetic meaning in 'maya'. This complex semiotic coding, on the basis of a play on a language that the language of the colonizer negates or occludes, is a characteristic feature of Mishra's verse and gives it a kind of polyphony – an 'Other' voice – markedly different from that found in Nandan.

The definition of the Fiji Indian also undergoes a transformation that lacks the optimism and affirmation of Satendra Nandan. Mishra's

'Indo-Fijian' (in a poem of that name) is all memory and maya, as he reconstructs out of 'papier mché' a self 'gored' by 'hysteria' and 'panic', and suffocated by a 'muffled scream'. There is no redemption from 'the panic of the cutting season', no escape from the original condition of indenture. It is this negative transformation that separates Mishra from Nandan as he constructs in the process a schizophrenia that is constitutive of the Fiji Indian. This schizophrenia of a fragment twice-dislocated finds its discursive form in the multiplicity of languages and voices through which it is articulated.

With an eye to the past (the India left behind by the fragment) and another towards the present (the future, for those who know the 'grisly truth' of the wreck of the *Syria*, offers no consolation), Mishra mediates the girmit ideology with poems that do not open up their secrets easily to the outsider. One of its central metaphors, and its primordial secret, is captured in the title poem of the collection, 'Rahu', the name given to the decapitated demon whose immortal head (since he too had partaken of the eternal elixir during the churning of the ocean) intermittently plays havoc with Vishnu's conspirators, the Sun and the Moon, by swallowing them. The ambiguity of Rahu – forever lost in the cosmos and recognized only by his shadow as the solar and lunar eclipses – becomes Mishra's central metaphor both of the girmit fragment and also of mankind generally. Mishra's discourse is thus 'interlaced' with an account of a race who migrated 'from the land of henna, vermilion' ('In Nadi') only to find that, like Narcissus, their gaze merely unlocks the truth about themselves.

The Fijian revolt of 14 May 1987 (exactly 108 years after the arrival in Fijian waters of the sailing ship *Leonidas* with its cargo of 463 Indian indentured labourers) has shattered 'Little India' and its girmit ideology to such an extent that the fragment itself would now require perhaps a different kind of reading and theorizing. In the aftermath of the revolt the girmit ideology lay in tatters, its believers distraught. Since the ideology was largely retrospective, a racial memory, there was no self-sustaining belief system that they could go to for support. Without the dynamic tensions of the centre (the original mother country, India) the Indian fragment turned inwards and panicked. It could not respond to the new situation through radical action since its own commitment to Fiji was so deeply ambiguous. The Fiji Indians, as a relatively homogeneous and self-sufficient community trapped in a cultural time-warp, relapsed into a pathetic rhetoric that could not grasp the real, and extremely complex, issues at stake. For at the heart of the Fijian rebellion was the struggle for the centre, a struggle for political power. Transformed into a political quest, the fragment's aims were clear: its own banishment, the terror of it and its haunting memories, could be made bearable only through political ascendancy. That ascendancy was finally denied them.

The literature of the fragment becomes so important because literature tells us 'truths' that history – the colonizer's history and historiography – finally withholds. The peculiar logic of Fiji Indian psychology, and even the inevitability of the Fijian rebellion, are prophetically implicit in Satendra Nandan's poems and short stories. In Nandan's enclosed world the ideological flaws of the fragment become patently clear. It is a kind of gestalt conception of race relations in which self-sufficiency replaces interaction and mutual dependence. As a consequence, for both races the 'other' existed in language only as scattered idiomatic phrases, not as fully developed linguistic representations. After a hundred years, neither the Fijian nor the Indian understood the other's social practices. Behind the imaginative worlds of Satendra Nandan and Sudesh Mishra lies a trauma of almost apocalyptic proportions. The events of 14 May 1987 made that trauma a condition of being from which even myths of millenarianism could not give release. Had V. S. Naipaul visited Fiji, he would certainly have understood that trauma and given us a much sharper conceptual framework to work with. Without his extraordinary perception, our attempts to come to terms with this 'Little India' will remain partial and incomplete. But then, if only Mrs Bamford had taken Oliver Vinod's advice and let us discuss the trauma of Mr Biswas in the first place . . .

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